

Article

Nature and the making meanings in Victorian Britain

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Abstract

During the Victorian era, men and women searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society. After reading the researched expectations of men and women of the Victorian era and relating them to Wilde's two works, readers can acknowledge the effect the expectations have on these characters; especially the men. Analyzing the characters in Oscar Wilde's works show how the expectations of society effects the characters' behavior and their reaction to society's ideals. Oscar Wilde examines the impact of Victorian society's unrealistic expectations on the individual in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, showing how rejection, whether from a potential partner or society as a whole, can lead to deceit and engaging in a double life in order to satisfy conventions. During the Victorian era, men and women searched for an ideal relationship based on the expectations of a demanding society. If a man or woman did not posses the qualities desired by the Victorian society, the opposite sex may have dismissed the person as an unsuitable mate. Oscar Wilde examines the impact of Victorian society's unrealistic expectations on the individual in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, showing how rejection, whether from a potential partner or society as a whole, can lead to deceit and engaging in a double life in order to satisfy conventions.

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Injury to, and disease in, the brain often provides crucial insights on the role of its different parts. A dramatic example is

the injury suffered by American railway foreman, Phineas Gage in 1848. Before his accident, Gage was liked by friends and acquaintances who considered him to be

honest, trustworthy, hard working and dependable. A freak accident caused a metal tamping rod to enter under his left zygomatic arch and exit through the top of his skull (Barker, 1995). Women in the Victorian society had one main role in life, which was to marry and take part in their husbands' interests and business. Before marriage, they would learn housewife skills such as weaving, cooking, washing, and cleaning, unless they were of a wealthy family. If they were wealthy, they did not always learn these tasks because their maids primarily took care of the household chores. Typically, women were also not allowed to be educated or gain knowledge outside of the home because it was a man's world. One critic, Richard D. Altick states, "a woman was inferior to a man in all ways except the unique one that counted most [to a man]: her femininity. Her place was in the home, on a veritable pedestal if one could be afforded, and emphatically not in the world of affairs" (Altick 54). Patriarchal society did not allow women to have the same privileges as men. Consequently, women were ascribed the more feminine duties of caring for the home and pursuing the outlets of feminine creativity. Victorian men also expected women to possess feminine qualities as well as innocence; otherwise, they would not be of marriage potential. In Charles Petrie's article, "Victorian Women Expected to be Idle and Ignorant," he explains exactly what the Victorian man was looking for: innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class, and they

must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. White muslin, typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with delicate shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The stamp of masculine approval was placed upon ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness; in short, recognition of female inferiority to the male (Petrie 184). The expectations men had for women caused women to prepare for marriage and gave women hardly any freedom. The men's expectations pressured women to be the ideal Victorian woman society expected them to be. The women had to prepare themselves for what was to come of their lives and it determined their future. If a woman did not meet the expectations of the Victorian male, she would end up spouseless. Petrie's article, "Victorian Women Expected to Be Idle and Ignorant," states, "From infancy all girls who were born above the level of poverty had the dream of a successful marriage before their eyes, for by that alone was it possible for a woman to rise in the world" (Petrie 180). Because women were denied the opportunity to work or take part in a man's world, they spent their formative years in preparation for marriage. They expected the men to take care of them and provide for them since they were unable to provide for themselves. Just as men had expectations for the ideal Victorian women, the women and the rest of society had expectations for the ideal Victorian man. Ingrid Ranum's article dis-

cusses the modern Victorian language and the roles of both women and men. When discussing men and masculinity, she quotes scholar John Tosh: “‘Becoming a man,’ Tosh claims, ‘involved detaching oneself from the home and its feminine comforts’ and achieving ‘a level of material success in the wider world’ including ‘the recognition of manhood by one’s peers’” (Ranum 242). In other words, men not only had to gain women’s respect before marriage, but they also had to impress the rest of society and their male gender. Men became victims of social pressures because their peers scrutinized their success. Michael Patrick Gillespie, author of “The Picture of Dorian Gray: ‘What the World Thinks of Me,’” states, “throughout the nineteenth century certain values—duty, respectability, commercial success, middle-class morality—occupied a central position in the Victorian consciousness” (Gillespie 5). Victorian men were not only competing for respect within their own sex, but they needed to impress the women too. If they were not married, it depicted that they were not fully masculine because they did not have a family to support. Supporting a family was a sign of true success within the male sex; he continues to quote Tosh stating: At the same time, however, ‘only marriage could yield the full privileges of masculinity.’ According to Tosh, ‘To form a household, to exercise authority over dependents, and to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining and protecting them—these things set the seal on a man’s gender identity’. Those household responsibilities—protecting, providing—are traditional and reinforce

homosocial recognition and economic success. (Ingrid 242-43). Keeping a woman and family safe in a home and providing comfort showed success for the male sex. Being able to work through any hardships and succeed financially providing for the family reflected that a man was successful in the workforce as well, which made him respectable by his peers and other men in society. Providing for a woman and a family were the ideals of the Victorian society, and not only There is an important thread in the historiography on Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks that identifies, but cannot specify, the imperatives underlying their approach as deriving from Australia’s settler-colonial conditions.[1] Yet this thread does not elaborate the implications of such an interpretation. Importantly, the reinterpretation proposed here is not delimited by either history or geography, yet takes both factors seriously. Indeed, while Les Murray has described himself proudly, if half in jest, as the ‘Last of the Jindyworobaks’ (Elliott, ‘Editor’s Note’ 283), the cultural dynamics of settler colonialism this essay identifies and applies to Ingamells and the Jindyworobaks extend well beyond this admittedly limited historical example. Paul Keating’s recent call for the ‘blending of black and white Australia to create [a] new national identity’ stands as only the most recent and public example of a persistent concern for settler indigenisation (Taylor), or what Philip Mead has described as ‘a continuing desire in the white Australian imaginary ... for a species of cultural-racial syncretism’ (560). Perhaps even more significantly still, the imperatives and exigen-

cies identified here are no more limited by geography than they are by chronology: similar movements driven by similar concerns, albeit exhibiting distinctive characteristics on the basis of differing cultural and political contexts, can be identified in, for example, the literary-cultural strands of Andean indigenismo in Latin America (Coronado; Rama), l'École d'Alger in 1944 on the grounds that she was undertaking A study of Australian literary-historical movements, at one point finding analogous 'moments' in the literary history of another southern continent in the New World: Latin-America. Only its Jindies try to go to a period of the Incas, the Incas whose records and race were blotted out by the Spanish conquest. (Palmer). The act of translating pain into images converts unique, isolated misery into tangiblesuffering, imaginable by other people. Pain that is often tucked away in some private, grey-tinged, shadowy space is abruptly allowed to flow into public consciousness, a well of red anguish. In this public sphere, the struggle that many sufferers face — that of distinguishing bodily from mental distress — is particularly acute. Famously, in the seventeenth century, René Descartes drew a distinction between the mind and the body this dichotomy dominated thinking throughout the nineteenth century. But, as people-in-pain have often discovered, embodiment is not a mechanistic process as Descartes would have it. The inextricable coupling of mind and body is eloquently observed in Virginia

(Dunwoodie; Haddour), the Canaanites in Israel (Ohana; Piterberg chapter three), and the Maorilanders in New Zealand (Stafford and Williams). Ever-sensitive and insightful, Nettie Palmer was awake to the comparative dimension at the time the Jindy-worobaks were writing, requesting a statement of 'Jindy theory' from Ingamells

Woolf's *On Being Ill* (1930). 'All day, all night', she writes, the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creatures within can only gaze through the pane — smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea.¹

That inner creature who gazes out is a sociable 'self'. Anxiety and terror can encourage the development of communities of sympathy. The person-in-pain seeks succour [Fig. 2]. When overwhelmed with pain as a child, for instance, Harriet Martineau's mother and father would 'tenderly' call for her to come to them, and she would rest her head on her mother's 'warm bosom [...] and [wish] that I need never move again'.² But visions of physical pain can also arouse cruelty. People-in-pain might be accused of fabricating their own rack upon which to writhe [Fig. 2 and Fig. 4]. Physicians and other care-givers might be impervious to the sufferers' cries [Fig. 3, Fig. 4, and Fig. 5]. 'Imperturbability' is an 'essential bodily virtue' for physicians, Sir William Osler famously declared in 1904, but

might it be an ambiguous blessing for patients?³ Anaesthetics and effective analgesics silence the person-in-pain [Fig. 6 and Fig. 7]. Pain, once again, retreats to private, silent depths.

The most influential model of pain is the mechanistic one espoused by philosopher René Descartes. In 'Meditations on First Philosophy' (1641), Descartes insisted that 'I have a body which is adversely affected when I feel pain'. He went on to say that

Nature teaches me by these sensations of pain [...] that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am very closely united to it, and so to speak so intermingled with it that I seem to compose with it one whole.⁴

Despite Descartes' attempts to show how body and mind 'intermingled', he became known for the Cartesian distinction between body and mind, arising largely from his famous image of the mechanism of pain, which was published in *Traité de l'homme*, fourteen years after his death.⁵ In this image [Fig. 1], fast-moving particles of fire rush up a nerve fibre from the foot towards the brain, activating animal spirits which then travel back down the nerves, causing the foot to move away from the flame. According to this model, the body was a mechanism that worked 'just as, pulling on one end of a cord, one simultaneously rings a bell which hangs at the opposite end'.⁶

It was a profoundly influential theory, especially after it became the model of the body propagated by the founder of clinical teaching, Herman Boerhaave. Despite the

fact that it has subsequently been dismantled, Descartes' way of conceiving of pain remained remarkably intact throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Descartes' filaments and animal spirit were converted into nociceptive impulses and endorphins, but his mechanistic metaphor and the Cartesian distinction between bodily pain and psychological suffering remained in place until Ronald Melzack and Richard Wall invented the Gate Control Theory of Pain in 1965.⁷ Their model showed how perceptions of pain were modulated by complex feedback systems. Context, including psychological cues, became central to the understanding of pain.

It is often said that the experience of pain isolates sufferers. But pain can also create bonds of sociability. This statue of a man suffering the agonies of gout in his big toe was produced in the late eighteenth century by the distinguished German porcelain company, Meissen [Fig. 2]. Gout typically caused agonizing pain in the big toes and other joints. According to the cleric and writer Rev. Sydney Smith, it was 'like walking on my eyeballs'.⁸ In this figurine the sufferer is surrounded by symbols of the cause of his affliction, that is, alcohol, rich foods, and other evidence of profligate living. Sufferers are responsible for their affliction. His son is shown sitting in a miniature chair with his foot slightly raised, indicating the hereditary nature of the disease. The gout sufferer is receiving succour from his wife. Representations of both the disease and the person providing sympathy are highly gendered. The image of the gout sufferer is almost without exception that of

a middle-aged or elderly man, while the person responding with sympathy to the person-in-pain is typically a sexually attractive, young woman.

Thomas Rowlandson sketched 'Amputation' in 1793, over fifty years before the invention of effective anaesthetics such as ether or chloroform [Fig. 3]. It shows a man tied to a chair, having his right leg amputated. He is screaming in agony. The main surgeon is wearing a carpenter's apron and is conducting the amputation with a common saw. An assistant holds a wooden crutch. The amputation is taking place in a dissecting room (a corpse can be seen in the lower right-hand corner) and on the walls are articulated skeletons, alluding to panics about resurrectionists (that is, men who 'resurrected' corpses from graveyards in order to sell them to dissecting schools for use in training medical students). The bewigged and bespectacled doctors are impervious to the man's agony. On the wall is a list of surgeons, including Sir Valiant Venery, Dr Peter Putrid, Launcelot Slashmuscle, Cristopher Cutgutt, and Benjamin Bowels.

. This was particularly the case given 'the horrible fears that anticipation [of amputation] unavoidably excites in the patient's mind' and the 'excruciating pain' of the actual operation.⁹ As another critic put it in the 1850s, some physicians had acquired a 'taste for screams and groans' and were unable to 'proceed agreeably in their operations without such a musical accompaniment'.¹⁰ When effective anaesthetics

were eventually introduced, many physicians argued against their use on the grounds that the tortuous pains of surgical operations were necessary to prevent haemorrhage. As the vice-president of the American Medical Association pronounced in 1849, pain was 'curative [...]'. The actions of life are maintained by it.' Without 'the stimulation induced by pain', surgery would 'more frequently be followed by dissolution'.¹¹

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century medicine was patient-orientated, with sufferers of pain and illness as likely to have recourse to 'quacks' as to regular physicians. Indeed, the distinction between the two kinds of practitioners was not as great as it was to become later in the nineteenth century, with the introduction of state regulation and the professionalization of medicine.

James Gillray's 1801 satire on 'Metallic Tractors' or Samuel Perkins's needles was an attempt to discredit 'quacks' [Fig. 4]. Metallic Tractors were two needles — one made of brass and the other of iron — with which practitioners would stroke painful afflictions as varied as rheumatism, gout, inflammation in the eyes, erysipelas, epileptic fits, locked jaw, burns, and all kinds of 'pains in the head, teeth, ears, breast, side, back, and limbs'.¹² The pain of gout, Benjamin Douglas Perkins (the son of Samuel Perkins and the person who patented the Tractors in the United Kingdom) explained, was caused by a 'want of perspiration' in the toe which made it be-

come 'positively electrified' while the 'other perspiring parts of the body [were] negatively electrified'. The pain would disappear if the 'equilibrium of electricity' could be restored 'by means of the distribution of the negative electricity in the body to the positive'. A healthy physician who was 'negatively electrified' should hold the Metallic Tractor against the painful toe, effectively communicating his negative electricity to the inflamed toe.¹³ Tractors were sold in the UK for five guineas, or the annual salary of a female servant.

Gillroy's sketch pits an arrogant, charlatan physician against a 'True Briton' who has been over-indulging in alcohol. On the wall hangs a painting of Dionysus, riding on a West Indian rum barrel, and, on the table, punch made of brandy, tea, sugar, and lemons is brewing. The patient is experiencing extreme pain: his hands are clenched, his teeth are grinding, and his wig is falling from his scalp. His dog howls in sympathy.

'Metallic Tractors' were exposed as a fraud by Dr John Haygarth in *Of the Imagination, as a Cause and as a Cure of Disorders of the Body* (1800).¹⁴ Defenders of the Perkinian Institute, however, claimed to be able to prove the efficacy of the needle. One defender of metallic tractors claimed to have cured a labouring man from Etton (Yorkshire) of 'violent Rheumatism in his right arm'. Afterwards, when the patient was asked his opinion of the operation, he replied that he thought it was 'very silly'. This response convinced the defender of the tractors that the cure had not been due

to 'the imagination, but the Metallic Tractors'.¹⁵

Emile-Edouard Mouchy's oil painting of 1832 shows a 'physiological demonstration' of a dog inside a garret [Fig. 5]. The dog is tied to the table, which has been specially fitted with metal rings. The dog is clearly howling in pain but the overall arrangement of the painting is of scientific objectivity and manly rationality. Indeed, the painting was intended to valorize physiological experiments as central to scientific progress. There has been some speculation that the surgeon is Franchois Magendie, the foremost French experimental physiologist who, in the 1830s, would start his lecture series by opening the abdomen of a dog.

Do dogs like the ones in this painting truly feel pain? For vivisectors, the answer was simple: animals were close enough to humans to make such experiments worthwhile but not so close to make vivisecting them cruel. According to Descartes, animals were mere 'automa' or moving machines, driven by instinct alone. He believed that animals' screams of pain were simply mechanical responses, which functioned as a form of human moral edification.¹⁶ More commonly, scientists and philosophers of the early nineteenth century pointed to the existence of a hierarchy of sentience. After all, they insisted, isn't it the case that not all humans are equally sensitive? The ability to feel, both in terms of physical sensation as well as inner sensibilities, was ranked hierarchically. The regulation of vivisection — because it involved cruelty towards animals, but also on the grounds that allowing cruelty to animals would open the door to

cruelty towards people — occurred earlier in the UK than in the rest of Europe. Indeed, British physiologists such as Sir Charles Bell were much more likely to emphasize dissection as opposed to the French tradition of vivisection.

This is the first daguerreotype of a real operation [Fig. 6]. It was created on 3 April 1847 in the amphitheatre of the Massachusetts General Hospital, where ether had been first used publicly as an anaesthetic, six months earlier. It was taken by the famous daguerreotype studio of Albert Southworth and Josiah Hawes, in part as a way of memorializing the pain-shattering achievements of the hospital. The patient — whose head is turned towards anaesthetist Dr Charles Heywood, who holds an ether-soaked sponge — is Athalana Golderman, a young seamstress, who had unintentionally stabbed herself in the leg with her scissors. At the foot of the operating table, on the right-hand side, is John Collins Warren, the surgeon who had performed the first public operation employing William Morton's ether. Opposite him is his son, Jonathan Mason Warren, who had introduced the use of the sponge to administer ether. To the left and rear of the photograph there is a human skeleton and on the right the base and lower limbs of the Apollo Belvedere, a statue of the Greek god associated with healing. The operation is being watched by students and visiting physicians who sit in a semicircle of benches that rise up steeply along the sides of the amphitheatre.

The introduction of anaesthetics was widely regarded to have promoted a certain kind of detachment, and certainly the staged feel of this daguerreotype effectively catches this new, surgical comportment. The impact of anaesthetics on operatives was alluded to by James Miller in *Surgical Experience of Chloroform* (1848) when he noted that, in the days before anaesthetics, medical students and surgeons 'grew pale and sickened, and even fell, in witnessing operations' — not because of the 'mere sight of blood, or of wound' but 'from the manifestation of pain and agony emitted by the patient'. In contrast, he continued, after the invention of anaesthetics these medical practitioners were spared the need to emotionally engage (or, indeed, attempt to disengage) with patients since 'a snort is the worst sound' they made.¹⁷ In the words of a physician writing in 1863, surgery became 'slow dissection', a term generally used about corpses, not living patients.¹⁸ David Cheever bluntly expressed it in 'What has Anaesthetics Done for Surgery?' (1897): as a result of anaesthetics, he observed, the surgeon 'need not hurry; he need not sympathize; he need not worry; he can calmly dissect, as on a dead body'.¹⁹

This watercolour by Richard Tennant Cooper was commissioned in 1912 by Henry S. Wellcome, the founder of the influential charity, the Wellcome Trust [Fig. 7]. It suggests some of the more disturbing aspects of chloroform. While the body is rendered insensible, it is toyed with by demons and bat-like spirits. Anaesthetics

transport the patient into a state without physical pain, but they also unleash worlds of unconscious, hostile drives. They render the person passive. The painting also portrays anxieties about the comatose body, placed at the mercy of outside agents, including surgeons. This was one reason for the hostility to anaesthetics when they were first introduced. Critics observed the immense power that anaesthetics gave surgeons over patients: patients could be treated as 'things', with no rights over their own body. In the words of physician James Arnold in *The Question Considered; Is It Justifiable to Administer Chloroform in Surgical Operations* (1854), the 'apoplectic stupor produced by chloroform' placed the patient at 'risk of delirious expression of thought' — that is, they might utter impious oaths rather than invoke verses proclaiming their closeness to the suffering Christ. Arnold regarded this as a problem, 'as respects woman particularly'. If women were made aware of this risk in using chloroform, it would 'deter them from its unnecessary use' (Arnold, pp. 16, 24). Chloroform disrupted coherent, godly pain-narratives. The insensible body was vulnerable to all manner of abuses. Even though Dorian is devoted to preserving his youthfulness and beauty, a part of him is ashamed of his sins of vanity. By hiding the portrait, no one but Dorian will be able to see the sinful life that he is living. On the other hand, the painting is growing in age and sin as a person would. Dorian is able to escape his life by allowing the portrait to take on the humanistic characteristics that he should be living. Because he

takes on the portrait life, the portrait experiences his different attitudes his conscious feels. Gillespie explains this concept in his critical book on *Dorian Gray*: The painting brings out the paradoxical attitudes at work in Dorian's consciousness, for it exerts both a liberating and an inhibiting effect. On the other hand, the picture gives him the advantage of escaping the horror he would have to face if his body began to show the physical consequences of the growing depravity of his life. At the same time, the demeanor of the portrait reminds him, with unrelenting insistence, of the inescapable effects of his debauchery (Gillespie 51).

By allowing the portrait to take on this role, Dorian continues to be accepted by society over the years. He is accepted because he is ever youthful, handsome, wealthy, and a respectable male by both men and women in the Victorian society. He meets the ideal characteristics Victorian women wanted men to be married to; therefore, making him a well suited prospect and a respectable man of Victorian society.

Even though Dorian is accepted by the Victorian society, his portrait does show that he is guilty of immoral acts. When Basil views the painting, he cannot believe it is his painting because the man he painted was young and beautiful; this man showed age and ugliness. Dorian says, "It is the face of my soul" (Picture Location 2137). Dorian is aware that he is living two separate lives and understands that his sinfulness and guilt are living through the painting. Basil sees the portrait as a lesson to Dorian, and tries to convince him to live an honorable life without the

vanity he possesses. He tells Dorian it is never too late to repent and ask for God's forgiveness, but Dorian does not want to listen to Basil and face repentance; therefore, "he rushes at him and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table and stabbing again and again" (Picture Location 2155). In an attempt to conceal his double life, Dorian kills Basil. He wants everyone in society to accept him for the beautiful, young man that he is physically, not the ugly and sinful man his soul conveys. After learning of Dorian's true nature, Basil could not accept Dorian as the ideal Victorian male; with his hypocrisy revealed, Dorian murdered Basil. If word were to get out about Dorian, other men and women of society would not accept him either. Although society accepted Dorian, Basil's death, along with Sibyl's suicide and Dorian's other sinful acts of pleasure throughout the novel haunt him in the final scene: He looked round and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward. He had cleaned it many times, till there was no stain left upon it. It was bright, and glistened. As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter's work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead, he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed

the picture with it. (Picture Location 3011).

The portrait haunts Dorian throughout the novel, and in the end he wants peace within his soul because is tired of living a double life. If the portrait is destroyed, he believes that he will be free of his guilt and he can continue his pleasurable life while still holding acceptance from society. By killing Basil, Dorian eliminated one source that threatened to destroy his acceptance. At the end of the novel, the only source standing in the middle of Dorian and society is the portrait because only the portrait exposes Dorian's true self and reveals that he is not the ideal man in Victorian society. If someone were to figure out the real reason of the portrait's ugliness, Dorian would be isolated from society. In the end, the Victorian community learns that Dorian possessed a double life. When men entered his house, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (Picture Location 3020). Dorian believed that destroying the portrait would rid him of his guilt, and he would be able to continue living his accepted life. What he did not know is that his own physica.

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